Newsday.com

Growing Worry At U.S. Airports

By Craig Gordon and Sylvia Adcock
Staff Writers

August 14, 2003

Standing as far as three miles from an airport, a single terrorist with a little training and decent aim could lift the Russian-made missile at the heart of Tuesday's arrests to his shoulder, pull the trigger and take down a commercial airliner, missile experts said Wednesday.

Hardly a far-fetched plot twist from a Tom Clancy novel, that scenario is one U.S. officials have grown increasingly worried about as terrorists seek ways to circumvent stepped-up airport security.

An SA-18 Igla surface-to-air missile like the one in this case is exactly the kind of weapon they fear -- simple to use, built by the thousands, available on the black market and extremely lethal.

"If a terrorist has this weapon, and he positions himself in the right area , he could bring down a commercial airliner without any trouble at all," said Jim O'Halloran, a missile expert and the editor of Jane's Land-Based Air Defense.

Weighing just 40 pounds and not even six feet long, the SA-18 is easy to transport use. It can shoot at a target three miles away and as high as two miles up, closing in on its objective in seconds at more than 600 mph. Its military purpose is to shoot down airplanes and helicopters, which it does by homing in on the heat from aircraft engines.

The SA-18 is just one type of surface-to-air missile, essentially a Russian knockoff of the U.S.-made Stinger missiles. Intelligence agencies estimate as many as 700,000 surface-to-air missiles have been made worldwide since the 1970s.

In fact, it's believed that al-Qaida might even have some U.S.-made Stingers, because the U.S. government provided them to anti-Russian rebels in Afghanistan in the 1980s. It is less likely that al-Qaida has any inside the United States.

Military aircraft are equipped with jamming devices designed to throw the missiles off course but efforts to equip commercial aircraft with such devices have gone slowly, mainly because of the high cost, estimated at as much as $10 billion.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has agreed to spend $2 million this year and $60 million next year studying this issue. Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington), has sponsored a bill that would require

all 6,800 U.S. commercial airliners to be equipped with the devices but said the sting operation shows the need for faster progress.

"We are taking the right steps but we really need to accelerate it, for this reason -- this is a glaring vulnerability for America's aircraft and we learned from this episode and others that terrorists will do everything they can to exploit that vulnerability," Israel said.

Still, some terrorism and aviation experts question whether the missile threat to commercial airlines is overblown, noting that terrorists have had little success in knocking down commercial jets, including a failed attempt by al-Qaida operatives to shoot down a passenger jet in Kenya in November. In addition, aircraft are designed to be able to fly with only one engine, so a missile strike on an engine could damage the plane but not prevent a safe landing.

So far, the airline industry isn't buying into the concept that the blocking devices are needed or effective on commercial jets. "Our biggest concern is we don't over-hype the situation," one industry source said. "This task force caught guys trying to make money. They didn't catch terrorists."

A more sophisticated anti-missile device, recently installed on the military's C-17 transports, uses a laser to confuse the missile's guidance system and turn it away from the aircraft.

Northrop Grumman, which designed the system for the C-17 and other military planes, said it easily could be put on commercial aircraft at a cost between $1 million and $2 million per plane.

NASA also is trying to get funding from its own security budget to study putting nitrogen gas in all aircraft fuel tanks, which would reduce the risk of an explosion if a missile hit.

In the end, however, even the best systems aren't foolproof, said Bill Kauffman, a professor of aerospace engineering at the University of Michigan. "The guys on the ground," he said, "probably have an advantage."

This story was reported by Gordon in Washington and Adcock in New York.